

Fifty Years of Earth Day

This week we celebrate fifty years of Earth Day. As the world slowly emerges from a pandemic that has devastated lives, societies and economies across the globe, we begin to see light in the darkness. The Christian celebration of the earth reminds us that we must also celebrate human and divine life as we rebuild the world anew.

Earth Day's Christian origins are lesser known than the secular and political inspirations of a global movement that mobilizes over 1 billion people annually. In 1969, John McConnell, a devout evangelical, was inspired by his faith to promote a day to celebrate the earth. The scriptures, such as Psalms, reminded McConnell of our duties towards creation: "The earth has been given to the children of men." His vision invited all people to celebrate the planet during the spring equinox when the earth renews itself, and to this day the UN celebrates International Earth Day by ringing the Japanese peace bell.

This year – marked by the global coronavirus pandemic which has disrupted so many human lives through economic hardship and death, shaken our sense of stability and even deprived us of the sacraments during Easter – we slowly emerge from darkness and experience the gentle renewal of spring. The budding shoots and flowers, the song of birds and the energetic activity of wildlife give us hope and remind us that the Lord is the source of all life and activity. Earth Day, as McConnell envisioned it, is a celebration of peace and life on earth, and more deeply, a celebration of the Lord of Life on earth.

This same Spirit-filled vision of the environment is the inspiration for *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis' encyclical on ecology, which also celebrates its 5th year anniversary in 2020. Pope Francis invited all people to 'care for our common home' and synthesized Catholic teachings on ecology, drawing from the Church fathers, the Scriptures, recent popes, scientific studies and the wisdom of other spiritual traditions. He spoke of an *integral ecology* "where everything is connected" and challenged everyone to strive for ecological conversion. *Laudato Si'*'s challenge was spiritual, technological, economic, generational, epistemological and political.

In Florida, it has been uplifting to see many of our Catholic politicians, from both parties, rise to the challenge. Florida members of congress have been active in proposing bipartisan legislation to address climate change and rising sea levels. Governor Ron DeSantis, a practicing Catholic, has made environmental protection a top priority, allocating \$625 million to preserve water resources, including Everglades protection and coral reef restoration. The governor's actions demonstrate an understanding that the lifestyle of Floridians is deeply interrelated with the natural environment.

Hopeful actions should be celebrated, but we must also protest harmful ones. For more than half a century, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) has provided environmental protections across the country. Earlier this year, sweeping proposed changes to NEPA threatened the integrity of our country's foundational environmental policy, and were opposed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops because they undermine the common good. Among these changes are the removal of cumulative effects analyses from the NEPA review process,

effectively preventing the forecasted buildup of pollution in the water or carbon dioxide in the atmosphere from influencing the design of federal infrastructure projects.

Florida has benefitted from NEPA. For instance, consider the Everglades Parkway, which runs through the Big Cypress and Everglades watersheds. NEPA prompted parkway design to prevent induced development in sensitive and complex natural areas that provide critical habitat for many species, while simultaneously improving the vital and life-giving flow of water through the Big Cypress and Everglades wetlands. This resulted in a fundamentally better highway that has provided sustainable, lasting benefits.

We must all work together to care for our common home. Pope Francis' encyclical was addressed to everyone. Christians, however, have a special responsibility to witness to their faith and practice what they preach. We will be known by our love (Jn 13:35), and this also extends to the love Christians show to "brother wind, sister water and mother earth" (St. Francis, *Canticle of the Sun*) In our families, in our parishes and communities, as the world begins to renew and rebuild itself from this terrible pandemic, Catholics have an opportunity to start anew and build on the solid foundation of God's love.

My hope is that the warmth of springtime will remind us of God's radiance and presence. Florida, after all, means "full of flowers," named by Spanish explorers who arrived in April during Eastertide and were struck by its natural beauty. We all have an opportunity to go forth from this pandemic and rebuild a Florida "full of flowers," respecting natural and human ecology. I also pray that our political representatives work together to lead the way.